

The Buddy System

Supporting each other can help us rebound after challenging calls.

BY TIM DIETZ, MA, LPC

Years ago, the phone rang in my behavioral health office, right at the 7 a.m. shift change. It was a company officer who had just arrived at work. “Do you remember that bad call we ran a couple of shifts ago?” he asked. He explained how the call had impacted him and how, on his days off, he was not his usual self. He had trouble sleeping and felt irritable. “Whatever my wife said to me, I would argue—sometimes to the point of yelling,” he said. “This is not like me, and I feel terrible about it.” He explained how the night before, he yelled at his child for grabbing a comic book before bed. “I lost it with him,” he said, “over a stupid comic book! I feel like a horrible husband and dad.” He said that morning when he arrived to work, for the first time in 15 years, he didn’t want to be there. “What is wrong with me?” he asked. “Am I going crazy?”

Chances are, this officer and others like him will put up a facade so others won’t recognize they are struggling, but their co-workers will know something is wrong. If someone has responded on a particularly stressful call, or if they are experiencing a difficult situation in their personal life, it’s likely they will exhibit some behavioral changes. The once-chatty colleague becomes quiet and distant. He might even isolate himself a bit, lose interest in exercising or, like the company officer from the anecdote above, become a bit more irritable.

Let’s consider what we can do, on the same day as a stressful event or even days later, to take care of our co-workers and friends who might need support.

Talk & Listen

We have a couple of choices after a stressful call. We can hang on to it—put it in our backpack with all our other crap—or we can talk to someone. Stating that a call got to you—that it sucked or was particularly difficult—is not a sign of weakness or that you chose the wrong career. It is a sign you don’t want to carry it around with you any longer. Talking with co-workers (or others you trust) tends to help us process these stressful events a bit more quickly. If you hear a co-worker say that a call really sucked, your job is to ask, “What was it?” Or, simply ask why it was difficult and let them tell you. Just listen; you don’t need to give advice unless they ask for it.

Get Active

In my experience, an interesting phenomenon occurs when something happens beyond a firefighter’s control—real or perceived. They can get so focused on the thing they can’t control that they forgo self-care. We know the importance of physical fitness in the fire service. Exercise also is important following a stressful event. If you notice a co-worker is struggling after a rough call or difficult situation, try to get them to do something physically active. If they have already worked out that day, do something fun like shooting baskets, or whatever fun physical activity your crew enjoys. Exercise helps release endorphins—the “feel good” neurotransmitters—and it eats up the residual stress hormones your

body released to be successful on that call. It also improves your mood by lowering the symptoms associated with mild depression and anxiety that can follow a stress event.

Step Away from the Cheeseburger!

That bacon cheeseburger sounds so good after a stressful day! That's the survival part of your brain telling you that you are under stress and need to eat high-fat foods to survive for the long haul. Don't fall for that. If you or a co-worker are about to dig into a high-fat, high-sugar or otherwise unhealthy meal after a challenging call, think about a better option. Continue to eat healthily!

Plan Fun Activities

Discuss what you are going to do when you get off work—things that you can look forward to! Sounds a bit corny, but the intent is to get you and your co-workers to think about something positive after a crummy event. A bike ride, a jog, hitting golf balls, etc. If you're worried about someone else, you might ask them to go with you for a fun activity you have planned.

Laugh

Billy Graham once said, "A keen sense of humor helps us to overlook the unbecoming, understand the unconventional, tolerate the unpleasant, overcome the unexpected, and outlast the unbearable." After a rough incident, watch a stupid-funny movie with your crew, one with non-thinking, dumb humor. Force yourself to laugh from your diaphragm. Fake it if you have to; laughter has been shown to release catecholamines and endorphins. These will help take elevated vital signs (BP up to 30 points higher than before call) and return them to pre-incident levels.

This is how we take care of ourselves and each other. We talk about stuff that may bother us, we stay active, eat right, look forward to uplifting things and we laugh together. When you notice someone's behavior has changed in a negative way, invite them to talk or to join you for a meal, a movie or another fun activity. It can be the catalyst for getting them back onto a healthier path. Who knows...you may even save their life. **BS**



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